

To Hell and Back

OP Reaper

QRF CASEVAC Site

The BMG Saga



For some, coming home means flag-waving crowds, cheers and parades. For others, there is no real coming home, just a struggle to adapt to who they've become and make sense of what they'd done.

I'm an Air Force photojournalist, a Wounded Warrior and Purple Heart recipient, and not ashamed to admit it. I've been involved in numerous combat engagements in the mountains of Afghanistan, yet recently I feel like every sacrifice made by those I love have been nullified as the Coalition pulls out of the valley we primarily operated in.

This is a struggle for me.

What keeps me going is the hope that by sharing our stories, perhaps you'll somehow further dedicate yourself to readiness and become more resilient.

Today marks two years since a team of 7th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment scouts, a few Navy augmentees and I fought a well-trained, well-equipped and outnumbering enemy in northern Bala Murghab (BMG), Badghis Province.

The reality is any Airman, Sailor or Coastie at any time can be tasked with augmenting the Army or Marine Corps ground forces, and you could find yourself in a situation you've never imagined.

I implore you each to become and stay technically ready - it could be vital to you and your team. You'll see how medic Spc. Kellen West's ability to continue his primary job of rendering medical aid while bullets streaked around him saved lives. He knew his job well enough to do it under the most



U.S. Army Pfc. Ben Bradley (left), a Bulldog Troop, Red Platoon scout (7th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment), ducks away from small-arms fire, as fellow scout Sgt. Jeff Sheppard, launches a grenade at the enemy's position, during a combat engagement in northern Bala Murghab Valley, Baghdis province, Afghanistan, April 4, 2011. Bradley, Sheppard, U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Kevin Wallace, U.S. Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Ryan Lee and his military working dog "Valdo" were all wounded by a rocket propelled grenade blast in the engagement. All service members suffered minor wounds and Valdo was critical, but survived the attack. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

extreme circumstances.

I beseech you to optimize and maintain your physical wellbeing - lives may depend on it. You'll see how while wearing body armor and carrying hundreds of rounds of ammunition, a rifle, food, supplies and camera gear, combat videographer Petty Officer 1st Class John Pearl was still able to throw a wounded shipmate over his shoulders and carry him, running for a few kilometers over rugged terrain while under sporadic fire most the time.

It's just as important to be mentally and spiritually ready for combat. At any time you could lose someone you love dearly. How will you cope with that?

For me, coping in the short term was automatic - I just numbed

myself. However, in the aftermath and upon redeployment, resiliency is extremely important.

Reflect on yourself and take command of your destiny as I first recount for you the saga of BMG, culminating with Operation Red Sand, the pivotal mission that seized control over remaining parts of the valley.

The Bala Murghab saga

The road to securing BMG was a long one. After all, BMG was once likened to a Taliban vacation spot, a sanctuary far from the Coalition where insurgents effectively displaced nearly all local farmers and villagers during their ruthless reign over the valley.

Change in BMG really started

in 2006, when the Spanish Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the Badghis capital city, Qalal-Naw, was asked to travel to BMG to replace a dilapidated bridge near the BMG District Center. The operation to build the bridge was launched in August 2008, when Italian observers, a U.S. Army embedded training team (ETT) and a brigade of Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers set off toward BMG.

According to John Bessler in his report "From the Field," the movement to BMG remained uncontested until the convoy neared the village of Akazai, a village currently adjacent to Combat Outpost (COP) Victor.

As the convoy approached Akazai, vehicles struck improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and fighting erupted with a Taliban ambush. Ironically, while performing a resupply mission to COP Victor in December 2010, my convoy also struck an IED near the same position, and we also fended off a brutal Taliban ambush.

The August 2008 combat at Akazai ended with two ANA and one U.S. Soldier killed, and a dozen ANA and several U.S. wounded, stated Bessler.

The ANA brigade and ETT Soldiers finally made it to BMG, and spent two months fighting from foxholes, as the EET presence increased to 24 U.S. and about 60 Italian and Spanish Soldiers. Survival was the main objective as the Soldiers build Forward Operating Base (FOB) Columbus.

It wasn't until February 2009 when the troops took their first shower, a full five months after entering BMG to build a bridge, which resulted in establishing FOB in the valley to begin what would become a multi-year mission to establish security in the insurgent-infested valley.

Internet searches of operations there may reveal the Army Combat Studies Institute book "Vanguard of Valor II," which contains a detailed documentation Op. Red Sand in Ch. 4.

The search may also expose the heroes who paved the path ahead of us, the likes of former Marine Staff Sgt. Michael Golembesky and his Marine Special Operations Team 8222, whose accounts will soon be told by Golembesky in his book "[Level Zero Heroes](#)."

MSOT 8222 operated with 82nd Airborne paratroopers and Italian soldiers to clear insurgents from the central portion of the BMG Valley during Operation Buongiorno, after two paratroopers drowned in the muddy BMG River while trying to retrieve supplies airdropped off course.





Italian and Afghan National Army soldiers dug trenches to live in and fight from at Combat Outpost Victor, Badghis province, Afghanistan. Servicemembers at COPs along the north and south border regions of the security bubble live a lifestyle not seen since World War I. Fighting from and living in trenches, these Soldiers fend off recurring attacks and struggle to maintain the bubble's security and keep the villagers living inside the bubble safe from outside activities. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

The full struggle to rid BMG, one of the poorest and most rural areas in Afghanistan, of the oppressive Taliban occupants really began Nov. 4, 2009, when Army Sgts. Benjamin Sherman and Brandon Islip perished in the icy BMG River.

Initially Sherman and Islip were missing-in-action, which prompted the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to launch Operation Hero Recovery, which became one of the largest and most time-intensive personnel recovery missions in the 12-year Afghan war.

Using the momentum generated by Operation Hero Recovery, ISAF looked to execute an extensive clearing campaign in BMG. Coalition forces, MSOT 8222 and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) began a six-month mission of intense fighting to gain control over BMG, which was home to drug and smuggling routes.

"The Taliban had never seen this type of offensiveness and aggressive actions from ISAF and ANA units before," stated Golembesky on his website. "Instead of being on winter rest from the heavier fighting in the southeast of the country, the Bala Murghab Taliban was forced to fight throughout the freezing Murghab winter, if they

wanted to retain any hope of keeping control over the valley and its vital drug and smuggling routes."

On March 16, 2010, which was MSOT 8222 team member Gunnery Sgt. Robert Gilbert's 28th birthday, Coalition and ANSF forces assaulted the Taliban in the small village Burida. The mission was successful, but Gilbert was killed during the firefight.

Gilbert's death darkened morale with the Special Forces team, but they struggled on to finish their mission, which paved the way for eventual success in the valley.

Before they redeployed, MSOT 8222 launched two more major clearing operations in BMG, the last being the battle for the village of Daneh Pasab.

According to an [Army Special Operations Command](#) press release, the battle at Daneh Pasab lasted 12 hours, and resulted in dozens of insurgents killed, weapons seized, narcotics destroyed and an intricate insurgent tunnel system exposed.

The success at Daneh Pasab allowed 30-40 displaced families to return to their homes.

In the time between Sherman and Islip's deaths and when

I arrived in Afghanistan in October 2010, several other American, Italian and Afghan servicemembers gave their lives creating a security bubble made from nearly a dozen COPs, which protected Afghan villagers in about 50 percent of the valley.

Coalition forces and ANSF controlled access into central BMG, and had pretty much squeezed the insurgents out. However, one step outside that security bubble almost guaranteed a firefight. When Bulldog Troop, 7-10 Cav., arrived into theater, their job became not only to hold that 50 percent, but to continue bringing the fight to the enemy's doorstep and gaining control over the rest of BMG.

The northern- and southern-most COPs in BMG were manned by scouts from Bulldog Troop. White Platoon, commanded by 1st Lt. Nick Costello, operated from COP Delorean and Observation Post (OP) Cougar in the south; and Red Platoon, commanded by 1st Lt. Joseph Law, operated from COP Metro and OP Liberty in the north.

As a medic, Marsh and fellow medic Spc. Oscar Castro, not only performed foot patrols, seized Taliban-controlled land and engaged in firefights, but many times had to rush to aid when fellow Soldiers were wounded.

Marsh was there when White Platoon fought for the hillside overlooking COP Delorean and built OP Cougar.

"We're like one family here," said Platoon Sgt. Mohammadi.



U.S. Army Sgt. Jonathan Sweetman, Bulldog Troop, White Platoon, looks through his rifle scope to scan for insurgents during a reconnaissance patrol near Combat Outpost Delorean, Bala Murghab, Badghis Province, Afghanistan Jan. 9, 2011. Sweetman led one of the four fire teams on the patrol and all four teams came under accurate small-arms fire. Insurgents also launched a large-scale attack on COP Delorean Jan. 6 from this field and two other areas. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

"We were under constant enemy fire, and had to avoid mines and frequent rocket attacks during the day, and did most of the building at night," said Marsh.

A fellow Soldier recalled the many nights Marsh spoke of, and described the time when he was part of a four-man scout team that came under an aggressive attack while scouting out a nearby hill.

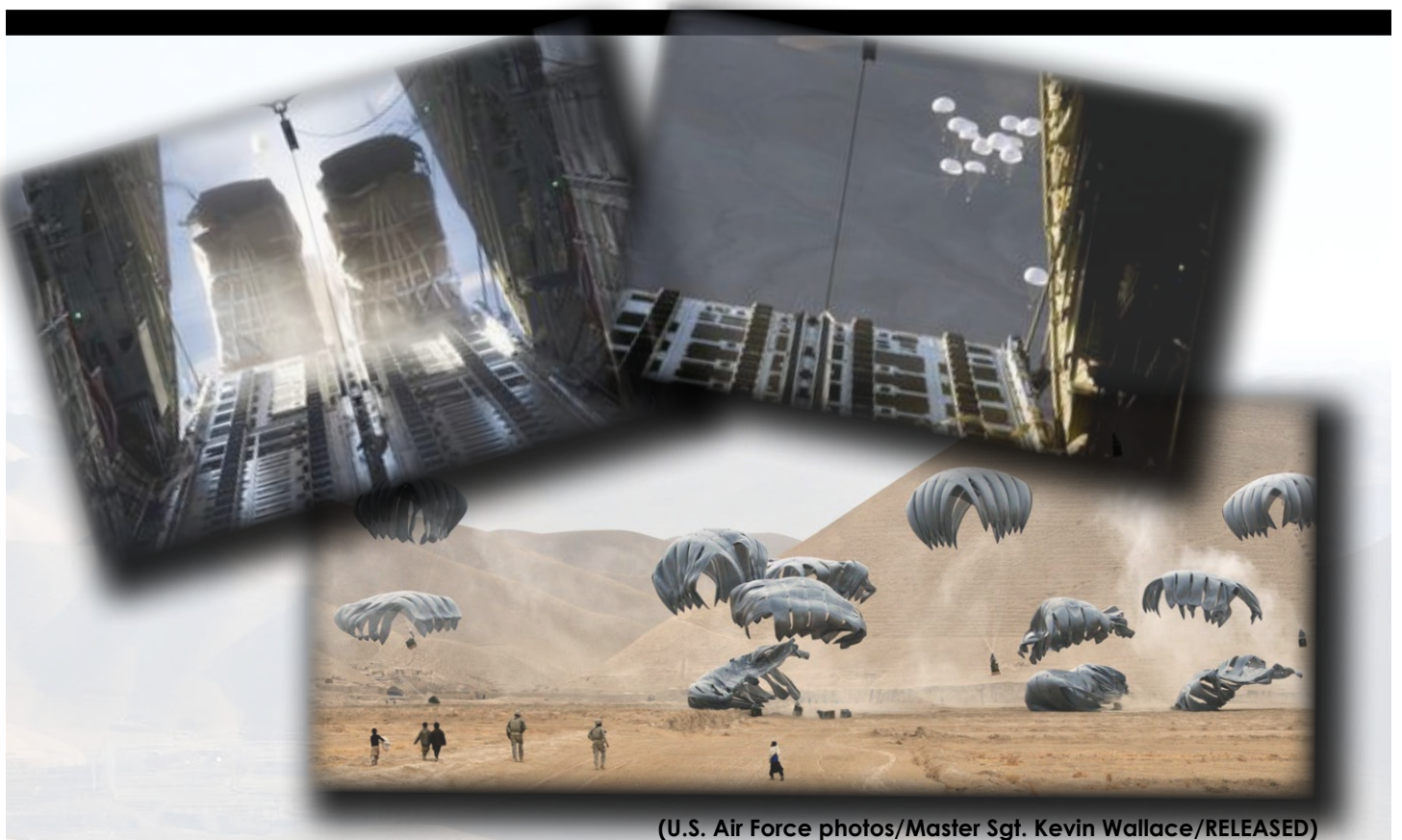
"We got pinned down really good right over there," said Pfc. William Orkies, pointing to a hilltop roughly 400 meters from OP Cougar. "The four of us stood our ground against about 40 insurgents who were anni-

hilating the hillside with (rocket propelled grenades) and small arms. We eventually had to break contact, ex-filtrate by the rear of the hill and regroup back here at COP Delorean."

The stories of sacrifices made on the hills around OP Cougar are many. But, through tireless effort and continued dedication, the scouts and ANA soldiers built the OP, and kept the vital location secure so over-watched activities could continue in their area of operations.

One theme common to BMG was that Coalition forces and Afghan soldiers slept, worked and fought as one team.

"We're like one family here," said ANA Platoon Sgt. Ghulam Hazrat Mohammadi, the ranking ANA at OP Cougar. According to Mohammadi, their



(U.S. Air Force photos/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

tactics proved successful.

"When we go on patrol, we get good feedback from [Afghan] people that security has improved since the ANA and Americans arrived here," said Mohammadi, who hailed from Herat City, Herat Province.

Like many ANA soldiers, Mohammadi said he joined the army because there weren't many opportunities for him. He admitted that the opportunities for young men are improving, but he'd found a sense of dedication to his unit and to the ANA.

"I really want to help my people," said Mohammadi. "Someday I will have children of my own. I want a future for them that is much better than the world I was born into. I think that is common for all people in this world, and I believe it is achiev-

able here in Afghanistan."

Like MSOT 8222 and the 82nd Airborne paratroopers before us, helping the local people was always our main objective in BMG.

Command and control, and re-supply was always a significant challenge in BMG. During my tenure, the main American fighting force was 7-10 Cav., and they were headquartered in Herat. Only Bulldog Troop was forward deployed to BMG. There were also Marine Special Forces who worked hand-in-hand with Bulldog Troop, but reported to their own chain of command.

Ultimately, BMG was the battlespace of Task Force-North, which was made primarily of Spanish and Italian forces who reported to Regional Command-West's commanding

officer, Brig. Gen. Marcello Bellacicco.

This widely varied C2 situation caused significant challenges for troops on the ground.

Re-supply was primarily accomplished through airdrops using U.S. or Italian Air Force C-130 Hercules or C-17 Globemaster IIIs. At least weekly, supplies would have to be dropped near Forward Operating Base (FOB) Todd, then secured and brought into the FOB. Additionally, re-supply convoys would frequently have to roll out to each COP in BMG, ensuring the troops manning the outposts had ammunition, food, water, medicine, oil and other supplies.

COPs were frequently attacked and always at risk of being overrun, which made a constant flow of ammunition and supplies vital to holding the ground and



A mine-resistant ambush protected all-terrain vehicle sits at Forward Operating Base Todd, Badghis Province, Afghanistan, after it hit an improvised-explosive device in southern BMG. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

survival there.

Re-supply missions were often carried out in conjunction with combat patrols. One such mission happened New Year's week.

Pearl and I were at FOB Todd, Jan. 7, 2011 and Bulldog Troop's first sergeant, 1st Sgt. David Dempsey, summoned us to muster for a mission south

of COP Delorean toward Hell's Gate, the southern-most tip of BMG - an area impenetrable so far.

I was surprised to see Dempsey gathering for the mission, as he was in an Mine Resistant Ambush Protected all-Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV) that just hit an IED the day before. He was tossed about 10 feet in the air when the back of his vehicle was blown up, so I figured he'd take a few days off and remain at the FOB.

Senior Airmen Jose Cruz-Richardson and Jeremy Knox, Pearl and I headed back down to COP Delorean.

COP Delorean suffered a massive insurgent attack Jan. 6, when they were hit with RPGs and small-arms fire from three different directions for more than 45 minutes. Though they were attacked nearly every night, this was the largest-scale assault they'd suffered in quite a while.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Nicholas Lewis, Bulldog Troop, White Platoon, returns fire near Combat Outpost Delorean, Bala Murghab, Badghis Province, Afghanistan Jan. 9, 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

Dempsey said he'd have none of that, stating, "I go where my men go."

I certainly respect that, and was happy to have him on board as I'd operated with him before and knew he'd seen his fair share of combat. The guy had been in more than 60 convoys that hit IEDs, has hit 12 with his vehicle alone, and had done his fair share of foot patrols - you could say he's a seasoned veteran.

After muster, Dempsey, two Tactical Air Control Party Airmen,

Costello decided he needed to recon the battlefield and find the enemy's infiltration routes and firing positions.

The next day, we set out on a recon foot patrol well beyond the perimeter of BMG's security bubble, and into ground the enemy considered their own.

We moved across fields and sought out positions with evidence of enemy presence. A good distance out, we came across a small building in the middle of a field.

Scout Staff Sgt. Nicholas Lewis led a fire team to secure the area. The building was empty but, again, we found signs of prior insurgent presence.

We tactically moved down toward a riverbed and headed south along the river. As we came to a village, scores of inhabitants - men, women and children - boarded motorcycles and donkeys, and quickly headed out of town.

That's never a good sign.

Upon seeing that, Costello decided it would be best to hold up on the riverbed for a while and observe the village. Moments later, we were attacked with accurate small-arms fire from our flank.

Lewis was the first to respond and began laying down suppressive fire. He called some of us up on a firing line, while others kept watch across the river into the village and to the fields due north.

Meanwhile, Cruz-Richardson called back to Bulldog Troop and requested close-air support (CAS). He had fighters in the air but they were engaged elsewhere so his request was denied.

Without having the Air Force overhead, Costello needed to re-evaluate his plan.

After a quick discussion with Lewis and Sgt. Jonathan Sweetman, the lieutenant decided we would bound forward toward the direction from which we received fire, and continue to recon the fields and riverbed. They divided us into three teams and we pushed forward.



U.S. Army Sgt. Tyson Husk, a Scout with Bulldog Troop, White Platoon, discusses a bounding movement with his platoon leader, U.S. Army 1st Lt. Nicholas Costello, while on a reconnaissance patrol near Combat Outpost Delorean, Bala Murghab, Badghis Province, Afghanistan Jan. 9, 2011. Husk hails from Jefferson, Ore., and was wounded in the calf on a patrol in late 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

We made a great deal of headway, and gathered intelligence from the battle space the whole way forward.

After the long patrol, we were visibly tired and sweaty. We continued to tactfully move back to the COP, stopping by to talk to some village elders along the way.

The relationship White Platoon had with the elders is such that if someone new arrived in the area, the elders alerted Costello to their presence.

As we walked back, Lewis noticed a new face and stopped the man. Meanwhile, Costello summoned an elder, who introduced the new gentleman and explained that his family had just returned to the village.

"Holding this ground helps keep

the BMG security bubble intact, and keeps the Taliban out," said Costello. "We want them to be too afraid to come into the villages in our area of operations, and to know that the ANA is here to stay, that they can no longer terrorize the people of BMG."

Between January and April 2011, White Platoon killed dozens of insurgents and established new COPs. By early April, White Platoon secured all of southern BMG, including Hell's Gates and eliminated insurgent activities in the south.

Three Air Force TACPs assisted in the push to Hell's Gate: Staff Sgt. David Olson, Staff Sgt. David Chopik and Senior Airman Joseph Gilbert. The team relieved Cruz-Richardson and Knox, and hit the ground running, proving their mettle from



(Top left) Sgt. Jeff Sheppard, engages Taliban during Operation Red Sand at Bala Murghab, Badghis province, Afghanistan, April 4, 2011. (Bottom right) Spc. Dewayne Sims-Sparks digs in to fortify ruins during Operation Red Sand. (U.S. Air Force photos/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

their first week in BMG.

Army Sgt. Tyson Husk, White Platoon scout, recalled their effectiveness that first week.

"We were under pretty heavy fire and got eyes on a large amount of insurgents grouping in one particular building," said Husk. "We had JTAC on the ground with us and they called in CAS. A B-1 Lancer overhead dropped a bomb on the compound and neutralized the enemy. Given their numbers and location, we would have likely suffered injuries or worse seizing that Taliban-controlled ground."

White Platoon prevailed, and the squadron commander recognized that, and took action.

Lt. Col. Scott Mitchell, 7-10 Cav. commander, then looked to Red Platoon to do the same in the north.

We did just that April 4, 2011, during Operation Red Sand.

Operation Red Sand

A group of U.S. Army scouts, their medic, a Navy combat cameraman and I set out by foot April 2, 2011, into areas far north in the BMG Valley.

We ventured further than coalition forces had ever gone, and spent the night reconning villages, plotting locations and fighting positions both for ourselves, and anticipating enemy locations and contact.

It was a rough night, but paled in comparison to what was soon to follow.

The next night, all but one of the same scouts from Red Platoon, Navy dog handler Petty Officer 3rd Class Ryan Lee, his bomb dog 'Valdo,' a handful of ANA soldiers, Pearl and I returned.

Army Staff Sgt. Ray Mundo, Red Platoon scout, injured his back on the first patrol and had to stay back at COP Metro during the second day. However, he waited on standby, in case a quick-reaction force (QRF) was needed.

The team moved out.

This time we took to secure an area of ruins central in the location where we could operate patrols in known insurgent areas, and egress by riverbed if needed.

After securing the ruins in a field just outside Kamisari Village, we dug in fighting positions and fortified the eroded walls and doorways with sandbags, all under the cover of darkness. We also patrolled the nearby Kamisari and Joy Gange Villages, looking for evidence of mines, improvised explosive devices or booby traps.

At day break and without rest, we launched a patrol into a known insurgent hotbed and tried to convince locals to not support the insurgency and start



supporting their government, with promises that a better life and development being made possible.

Law assured the men that if they worked with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, they would see bazaars and progress like that seen in central BMG.

Unaccepting to Law's offers, the village elders became argumentative and accused our team of wrongdoing and trespassing. Tension grew in the air and the villagers became visually upset, spitting and behaving in a way you rarely see in people who typically put a lot of stock into saving face and respect.

Law ordered our team to move out.

As we headed out of the village, around a dozen fighting-age men began to line rooftops, and we knew a battle would soon ensue.

We headed back to our fortified ruins and dug our heels in for the inevitable battle that would find us.

The ruins we established as OP Reaper was eroded and roofless, and was basically a dilapidated, old, three-room mud hut.

I was in the western-most part of the ruins with scouts Sgt. Jeff Sheppard and Pfc. Ben Bradley. Pearl, Lee and Valdo were also in that room.

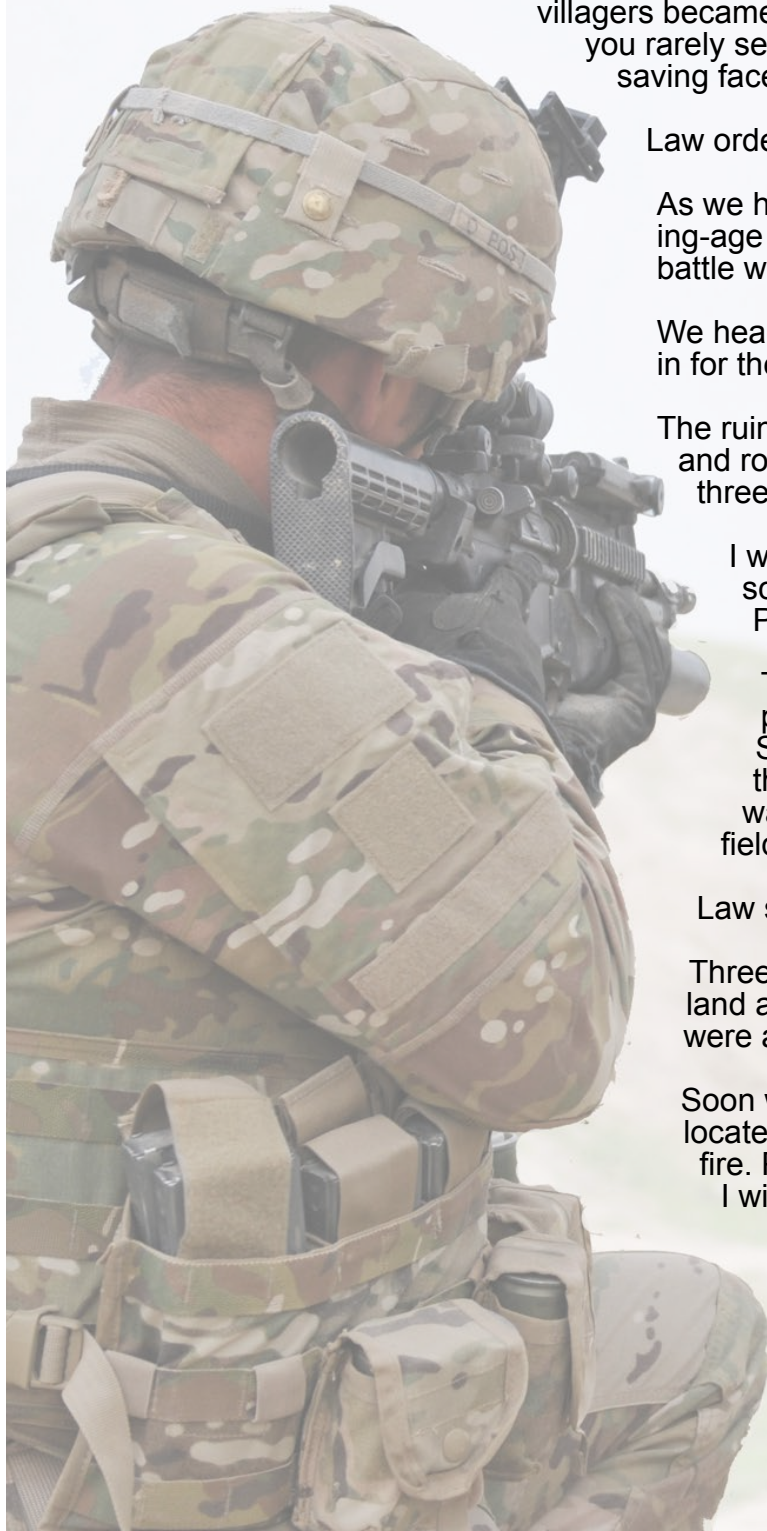
The center room housed an ANA soldier, his platoon sergeant, our interpreter, Law, scout Sgt. Peter Nalesnik and Maj. Jonathan Lauer, the 7-10 Cav. squadron operations officer, who was visiting from Camp Stone, Herat, for a battle-field circulation.

Law still commanded the platoon and mission.

Three ANA soldiers, West, scout Spc. William Newland and forward observer Spc. Dwayne Sims-Sparks were all in the eastern room.

Soon we began to take small-arms fire and started to locate where they were attacking from, and returned fire. Pearl was documenting the fight with video and I with still photos.

From where I stood, I noticed Sheppard and Bradley immediately engage the Taliban and lay down suppressive fire. Most of the incoming fire was originating from a compound several hundred meters to our north. Insurgents were also using canals to our east and west to flank us.



They were able to maneuver up and down the canals, spraying rounds at us at will from a wide array of cover locations. Almost immediately the fighting reached a level of intensity that forced me to lay down my camera and volley rounds back at the insurgents.

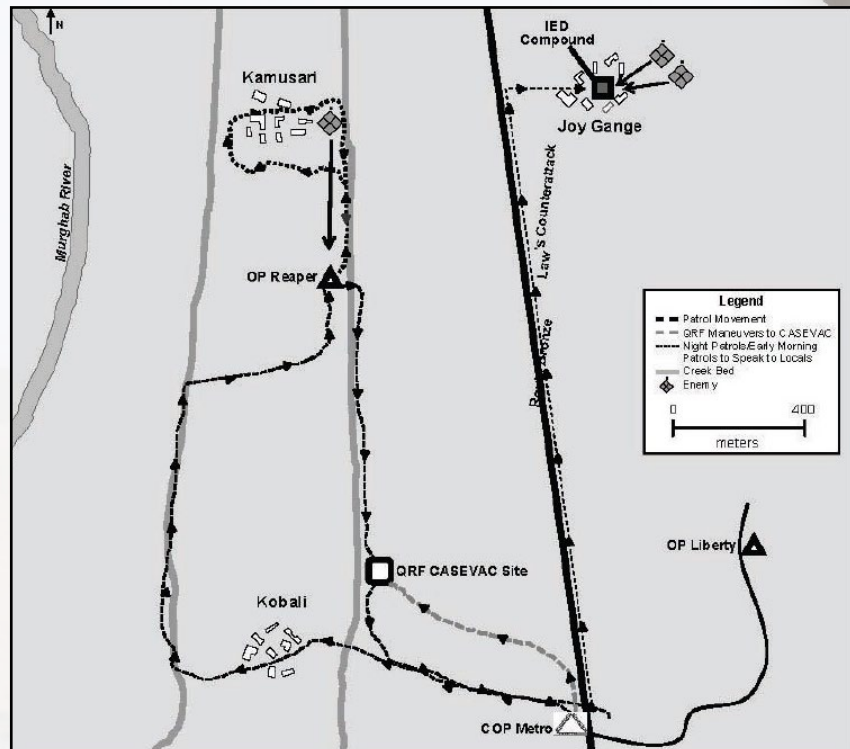
A few minutes into the firefight, I watched in awe as, while my co-worker Pearl was shooting video, an insurgent hit three rounds near his head, walking each round closer than the next.

I could hear several whizzing bullets passing very near to my face and body, and their sound is unforgettable.

At a distance, they sounded like pops; near my position, they sounded more like loud cracks; and when they passed within inches of my ears, they sounded like a high-speed bullet train roaring by.

The Taliban were bombarding us with AK-47 and a barrage of heavy machine gun (PKM) fire.

As we fought, I could literally see the mud walls of our ruins being cut down by the incoming



PKM fire.

Sheppard called out to Pearl that he'd better move. At that point, Pearl grabbed his video camera and moved into the next room. Our room was the smallest of them all, not well fortified and we were taking one hell of a beating.

The firefight continued for a few hours and we were literally

pinned down and under attack from the compound and both canals.

We needed a mortar mission or CAS desperately as we were severely outgunned, had minimal cover in the ruins and field, and the insurgent force attacking us was growing very quickly.

Italian Army soldiers from FOB Todd began laying mortar fire



Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace, a combat photographer, embedded with Bulldog Troop scouts in Bala Murghab, Badghis Province, Afghanistan. (Courtesy photo)

into the field west of where most the insurgents were attacking. The first mortar hit about 25 meters from my position.

Each falling mortar shook the ground like an enormous bass drum, rattling my bones and soul. The first mortar stunned me for a moment, then coming out of the haze I joined Sheppard and Bradley, calling out mortar positions to Law. Under Sims-Spark’s directions, mortars moved closer and closer to the target.

The enemy assault grew in intensity and I recall wondering if we’d make it out alive. Our 15-man team seemed doomed.

Still, Law kept working the CAS mission and, despite the dangerously close proximity to which bullets were impacting, I saw Sheppard and Bradley

keep fighting. It was inspiring!

Law was calling on someone to verify no insurgents were approaching from our south. I remember thinking that in order to see over the southern wall, I would have to run, fully exposed, through a hail of enemy AK and PKM fire, jump up to grapple the top of the wall and peer over.

Shaking and petrified, I garnered the courage and ran through the barrage of bullets and verified, indeed we didn’t have any surprises coming to attack us from the rear.

When I raced back to the front of the room and returned scanning the western canal, Sheppard shouted at me to stay down. I knew any dumb move would burden my team and they’d have to carry my

mangled body off that field. Still, keeping insurgents off our rear was worth the risk.

Through panic and impending doom, the scout team kept their focus and wits about them, and we all continued to fight our hardest.

Law called out to check the south again. This time, without giving it too much thought, I checked the rear.

With each dash to the southern wall, my heart skipped beats and rounds bounced near my body and face. I could taste their proximity as dirt peppered my face.

The fighting went on and continued to intensify. Sheppard was keeping the insurgents out of the river beds by launching grenades and one of our ANA



U.S. Army Pfc. Ben Bradley (left), a Bulldog Troop, Red Platoon scout (7th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment), ducks away from small-arms fire, as fellow scout Sgt. Jeff Sheppard, launches a grenade at the enemy’s position, during a combat engagement in northern Bala Murghab Valley, Baghdis province, Afghanistan, April 4, 2011. Bradley, Sheppard, U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Kevin Wallace, U.S. Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Ryan Lee and his military working dog “Valdo” were all wounded by a rocket propelled grenade blast in the engagement. All service members suffered minor wounds and Valdo was critical, but survived the attack. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

soldiers hit the compound center mass with a precisely aimed RPG.

No matter how hard we fought, they were growing in mass and their attacks were intensifying. It was clear they did not want us to set up a fire base in their backyard.

Our room continued getting pounded and we soon found ourselves taking three RPGs back to back, nearly destroying our northern defenses. Sheppard knew it was time to move and planned to lay down squad-automatic weapon fire to cover movement to the next room and he'd soon follow.

Before he had the chance to do so, the insurgents shot an RPG straight through the makeshift doorway in the front of our ruins, and I watched, as if in slow motion, as the grenade went straight over Bradley's head, skimmed within inches of my face and impacted the ground a few feet behind me.

When the grenade exploded I was thrown into the front wall and saw nothing but sharp white light. I couldn't smell, feel, see, and couldn't comprehend what was going on for moments ... then I heard clear as day, Sheppard screaming, "God damn it! Medic ... Medic ... Medic!"

I stumbled and regained my footing and found that I had all extremities and knowing Lee was dead, shuttered to look back. When I did, I learned he was alive, but Valdo was in really bad shape.

The RPG struck right behind Valdo and the heroic dog took



Sgt. Jeff Sheppard ducks from incoming machine gun and RPG fire during Operation Red Sand and Bala Murghab, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

most of the blast. Lee seemed extremely concerned for Valdo. Sheppard had shrapnel to the front of his arm, Bradley had shrapnel in his leg, and I caught some in my upper back and also had a concussion.

But we were all alive and while Lee and West tended to Valdo, the rest of us continued to fight.

Knowing the insurgents were dialed in on our position and that another direct RPG hit would kill the four of us, Law called for more mortar fire and CAS.

An ISAF fighter jet soon shrieked low and overhead, popping flares to scare the insurgents. A remote piloted vehicle pounded the compound with 30 mm cannons, and we egressed towards the canal.

I didn't know it at the time, but

soon learned that Nalesnik, Lauer and an ANA soldier were already in that canal, clearing our path forward.

During the fog of the battle, I really only saw what was before me and around me. I knew Sheppard and Bradley were in the fight, I knew Law was leading us forward and calling in fire missions, I knew Lee was struggling with Valdo and that West was tending to wounds, but I had little knowledge of the vital parts the rest of the team was playing in the fight.

I learned later that at one point, the ANA NCO, Company Sgt. Ali Ghouse, bravely protect-

ed Newland from a barrage of PKM rounds.

"I had massive amounts of small-arms fire coming at me," recalled Newland. "He grabbed my shoulders and threw me to

"God damn it! Medic ... Medic ... Medic!" screamed Sheppard.

the ground and then he covered me with his own body. He stayed there until there was a break in incoming fire."

That's the type of heroism you see in movies but rarely witness first hand.

Meanwhile, we battled our way into the canal and for two kilometers, we fought our way through sporadic small-arms fire.

The insurgents were seemingly coming out from everywhere and descending on the canal we were egressing in. Once again, almost certain doom seemed to be upon us.

Though I didn't know it at the time, Law, a prior-enlisted intelligence specialist with extensive tactics training, had a plan, and part of that plan was leading the insurgents into the open fields.

Meanwhile, we had to



M-ATVs and Humvees were Bulldog Troops primary vehicles for resupply and QRFs. Most patrols in BMG were executed on foot due to terrain and IED placements. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

get out of there, and with five of us wounded, this was no easy task.

Pearl carried Valdo, our wounded shipmate, on his shoulders.

I was behind Pearl in the canal and could see Valdo had a hole about the size of a Pepsi can in his intestine. Pearl was soaked in vomit and feces, but kept pushing forward, determined to get Valdo to the medevac site. Once we made it to a clearing, I saw two M-ATVs waiting for us, which Law had already coordinated.

Even coming out of the canal was intense as we had to climb up about nine feet, while the roots we grabbed would break away. I had about 200 of the 550 rounds I left with still on me, plus an AT-4 (anti-tank weapon), 9mm handgun, four grenades, camera gear, back-up camera gear, food, water and supplies - it was hard as hell to climb out of that canal.

Once I got to the top, I quickly saw that Dempsey and Mundo had driven two M-ATVs out into a field and were under attack, and were rocking their crew-serve automatic weapons at

distant insurgents.

We quickly crammed as many as we could inside the M-ATVs, others jumped in back, and we moved our wounded to COP Metro for a medical air evacuation.

We could only get a handful of wounded into the back seats and in the rear of the M-ATVs so many of the team had to, once again, run across the open field dodging bullets as they made their way to the COP.

Once we reached COP Metro, we found the COP was under attack and all our comrades who stayed behind during the mission were up on the walls engaging. West cared for Valdo and the rest of us, while more M-ATVs arrived for a mounted re-assault toward Joy Gange Village.

We got Valdo, Lee and Shepard airborne, and West then treated Bradley and me.

After being patched up, I was horrified to find that the mounted counter offensive left without me. I jumped in the back of an un-armored ANA Ranger about to ride back north but their

movement was cancelled, so I hauled butt to the walls of COP Metro to man a sniper rifle, and provided over watch.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Pearl already up there on a machine gun. He and I had been through much together on that deployment and for all my life, I'll truly consider him my brother.

Dempsey led a QRF and joined Red Platoon, and continued with mounted and foot patrols in the nearby villages, capturing and killing insurgents, destroying known



An insurgent compound explodes after a Air Force B-1 Lancer drops a 38GBU bomb on the facility in northern Bala Murghab Valley, Badghis Province, Afghanistan April 4, 2011. The B-1 responded as a close-air support asset and assisted 7th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment scouts from Bulldog Troop's Red Platoon in a sustained combat engagement, which resulted in the destruction of insurgent strongholds and improvised explosive device making facilities. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace/RELEASED)

compounds, capturing IED-making materials and destroying an IED-making facility.

No further coalition forces were wounded in the engagement.

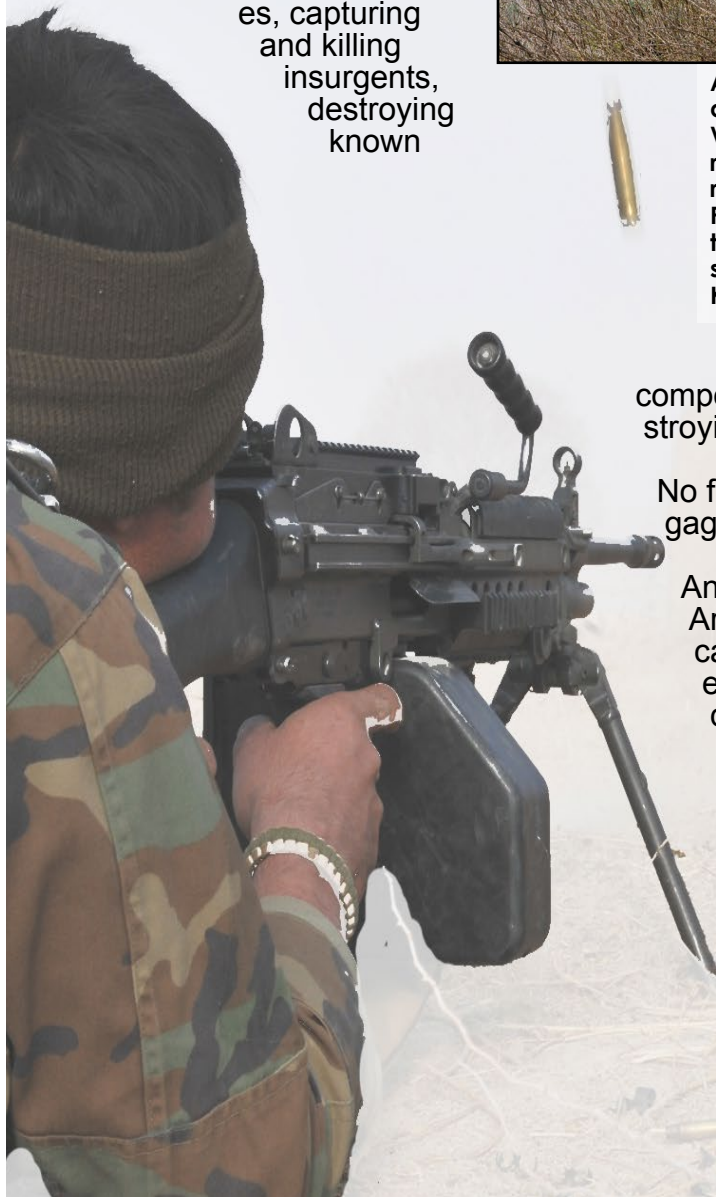
An Air Force B-1 dropped three 38GBU bombs and Army CAS assisted with hellfire missiles and 30mm cannon support from the air. As insurgents descended upon our egress, air support easily gunned them down in the open fields.

"The B-1 provided one 500-lbs GBU bomb on an enemy fighting position, and neutralized it," said Gilbert.

Meanwhile, our team found an IED making facility. We determined the building was bobby trapped and requested CAS to destroy it.

The TACP Airmen back at FOB Todd responded and directed two more 500-lbs GBUs to be dropped on that location.

"The next two bombs took out an enemy cache



that was booby trapped with explosives, tubes and rockets," said Gilbert the following day. "From the first to the last engagement, I knew the troops on the ground needed to get back to their COP, and every ordnance we provided helped accomplish their egress."

He was absolutely correct. We were in bad shape out there, and air support was vital to us coming home.

Italian Army soldiers supported with eight mortars from FOB Todd, and provided observation support from COP Chroma, which overlooked the engagement, and allowed them to accurately advise Army scouts on insurgent locations.

In the end, we were all fine and eventually all back to full duty. On the other hand, Valdo was sent to a Role-2 hospital at Camp Arena, Herat, where he was stabilized by a team of doctors. Once stable, he was transferred to Kandahar Airfield, where a veterinarian could treat him.

Until then, it had been an Army field medic, doctors and nurses who strayed from their 'human expertise' and did their best to patch up the canine.

For a long time I wondered what became of Valdo.

Then, out of the blue, in August of 2012, Maj. Kristina Mcelroy, an Army veterinarian, emailed me and explained.

Mcelroy was the deputy commander at Kandahar Airfield's veterinary clinic and, along with veterinary surgeon Maj. Ray Rudd, treated the heroic K9. After his wounds healed, Valdo returned to full duty at Naval Station Rota, Spain, with Lee.

As for the rest of the team, I keep in contact with nearly all of the Americans who fought at Operation Red Sand, and will probably do so for the rest of my life.

Operation Red Sand's impact on the BMG Valley was truly impressive.

"The enemy was unwilling to engage us, as well as unwilling to stay in those positions of



disadvantage," said Lauer in an interview with Army historians. "Just the amount of firepower that we were able to bring to bear during the engagement, it bolstered the confidence of the Afghans, it bolstered the confidence of the population, that we were able to take the fight to the Taliban and win."

During Operation Red Sand, Bulldog Troop had finally cleared nearly all the Taliban from Joy Gange.

After the success at Red Sand, White Platoon built a final COP in the southern tip of BMG, ensuring the Taliban couldn't resurge in that area.

By the time I redeployed in June of 2011, we had 17 COPs throughout BMG and had positive control over 90 percent of the valley.

I left Afghanistan certain that we did something great out there, and I had recovered from most of my wounds by the time I returned to Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England.

Under the terrorizing hands of the insurgents, many villagers fled BMG years ago and resorted to living in the mountains, without a river or valley to grow crops in. I've seen those mountains and assure you that they are no place to live. They are cold, infested with insurgents, and offer no fertile land or livable plateaus. To live in those mountains, one would literally

have to live in a cave, or build a mud hut on the steep mountainsides.

We gave those displaced Afghans their homes back; the Spanish PRT built them a school; we gave them hope. In fact, they gave me hope.

The progress we made in BMG made me believe these struggles are bigger than me, or the many men I know who fought with every inch of their lives out there.

I always knew a day would come when we'd hand control of BMG over to the ANSF. That day has already passed and I admit now I'm left with a bit of emptiness knowing Coalition forces are gone.

Will the ANSF be able to keep insurgents out of BMG? I don't know, but I hope like hell they do!

I pray they'll carry on the fight to ensure future generations of Afghans may play in their streets without stepping on mines and IEDs, that this beautiful land will someday see peace.

I remember a conversation I had with Ghouse, the day after he saved Newland at Operation Red Sand. He didn't want the Coalition to



ever leave BMG, but was optimistic that his men could continue to preserve the security we established.

"Though we, ANA, share similar genetics to the people we serve, I've seen that Americans have their hearts in this conflict and history will show that. When the day comes that we must take complete control of Bala Murghab on our own, we will be prepared to do so," said Ghouse. "Peace will come to this valley."

ANA like Ghouse and others I worked with out there were top-notch soldiers and true patriots. Tonight, on the 2nd anniversary of Operation Red Sand, I'll go to sleep thinking about BMG and pray for its future.

If called
to return

to Afghanistan, I'd try to get medically qualified to return.

It may be your turn next. The day may come when you're asked to augment your sister service heroes in some of the most dangerous parts of the planet.

Are you ready to step up and support heroes like those 82nd Airborne paratroopers, MSOT 8222 members or Bulldog Troop scouts?

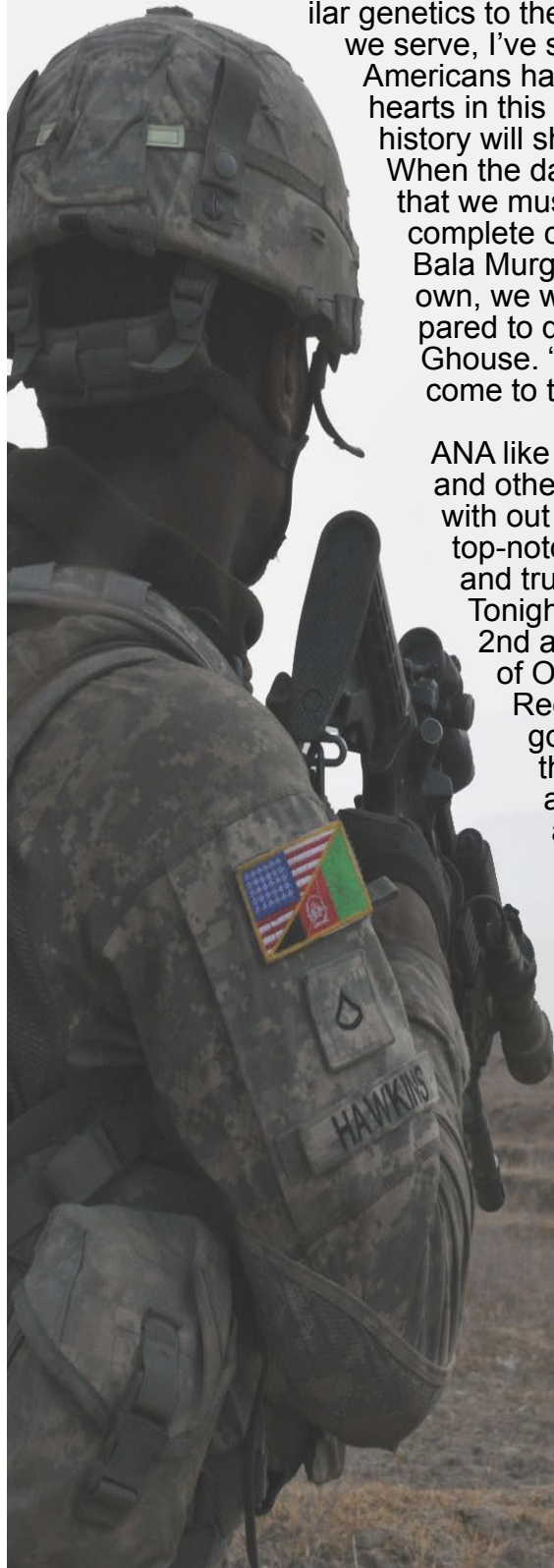
If not, prepare now. It's your duty. If I ever had the opportunity to converse with any insurgents whom survived our battle at Operation Red Sand, I'd plainly tell them this:

You should have aimed your shots better, you should have fired your RPG with precision ... you should have pierced our hearts, but you didn't.

No, your attempt on our lives failed. Our hearts still beat and they beat for your people, the people of the Murghab Valley whom you carelessly toss aside and grow fat from, as they continue to go without food, water or a peaceful existence.

As you attacked us on that field, I watched Afghan women and children take cover behind trees on the western side. As your men attacked us from within those families, we never once returned fire in their direction.

Why do we care more about your families



The Operation Red Sand Team



MAJ Jonathan Lauer



1LT Joe Law



SGT Jeff Sheppard



SGT Peter Nalesnik

than you? Why can't you see that your cause is futile?

Here's my sincere recommendation to you:

Lay down your arms and join the reintegration process. You should stop terrorizing your people and start assisting your government in rebuilding and development.

If you do this, someday you will see an Afghanistan you've never imagined possible. Perhaps someday your grandkids and mine could play in the park together, or tour some of Herat City's spectacular sites on the same tour bus.

If you don't, more will needlessly suffer at your hands.

Just join reintegration.

But, above all, I forgive you.



SPC D. Simms-Sparks



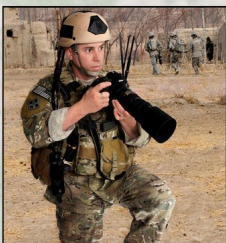
SPC Kellen West



SPC William Newland



PFC Ben Bradley



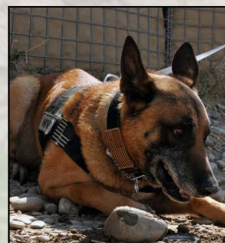
TSgt Kevin Wallace



PO1 John Pearl



PO2 Ryan Lee



PO1 'Valdo'



**This story is dedicated to all
the men who served in
Bala Murghab!**

(All background and captionless photos were taken by Master Sgt. Kevin Wallace)